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ABSTRACT

More and more research is focusing on the importance of a healthy work environment and its impact on workers' well-being and productivity. A culture of collaboration has been shown to have an important impact on school-reform efforts and is recognized by several authors as an effective platform for progress within an organization. A collaborative culture provides a medium to fulfill three basic human needs in an organization: an element of control, meaning in a situation, and positive support. Although a top-down authoritative culture is obsolete nowadays, it remains the pervasive practice in today's schools. The Department of Educational Leadership at Sam Houston State University, Texas, is presented as an example of a successfully implemented collaborative culture. Key components include physical proximity of offices, deliberate communication, a shared team vision, selective hiring, and effective leadership and empowerment. By understanding and practicing how to be a leader who cares about staff members and can work well with others, a truly collaborative culture can be created successfully in which all participants can thrive. Outcomes of a collaborative school culture include higher morale, enhanced commitment to teaching, and continuance in the profession. (Contains 14 references.) (RT)

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Running Head: COLLABORATIVE CULTURE

# Creating A Collaborative Culture

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Creating a Collaborative Culture

More and more research is focusing on the importance of a healthy work environment and its impact on workers' well-being and productivity. Studies such as Grogan's work on the "ethics of care" demonstrate how vital a collaborative, collegial group of co-workers can be. The Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling at Sam Houston State University has successfully developed this type of nurturing work environment. Not only do faculty members work together in a complete team effort, but they also model these values and practices for future school administrators moving through the degree and certification programs. By understanding and practicing how to be a leader who cares about staff members and can work well with others, we are successfully creating a truly collaborative culture in which all participants can thrive.

**Defining Collaborative Culture**

Culture has been shown to have an important impact on school reform efforts (Gruenert, 2000). Research conducted on school cultures has identified many types of cultures. One such culture is collaborative and is recognized by several authors as an effective platform for progress within the organization (Carter, 1999; Goldsmith-Conley, 1998; Gruenert, 2000; Wagner, 1998; Weiss, 1999).

A collaborative culture provides a viable medium to fulfill three of the four basic human needs in organizations as set forth by Peters and Waterman (1982): (1) an element of control, (2) meaning in a situation, and (3) positive support. However, Wagner (1998) warned that a collaborative culture is not prevalent in school districts across the nation. According to Wagner, although a top-down authoritative culture is obsolete, it remains the pervasive practice in today's schools.

Wagner (1998) recommended a constructivist approach to reform as the preferred method for implementing change and creating new learning standards. This approach was founded on collaboration in lieu of compliance. Wagner reinforced his position by stating, "It is a process of action in which everyone works to understand the problem, engages in discussion to reach agreement on the goal, and shares responsibility for implementing change, assessing progress, and achieving results" (p. 517). It was Wagner's contention that after these practices are followed over an extended period of time, a different set of work incentives would evolve. The norm would be for people to far exceed the minimal expectations of the authority figure and endeavor to earn the respect of their colleagues as they engage in the creative process.

Outcomes of a collaborative school culture include higher morale, enhanced commitment to teaching, and continuance in the profession (Weiss, 1999). Goldsmith-Conley (1998) stressed the importance of directing energies toward the development of a collaborative school culture. Tyrrell and Stine (1997) expressed the following position:

> Leadership practices that emphasize cooperative relationships and a shared vision can create schools that aim for excellence. Successful organizations focus on practices through which everyone participates in defining the common direction and takes on a leadership role because of the desire to excel. ...The emphasis on cooperative relationships can help bring about a work climate in which self-esteem, commitment, and task accomplishment are so significant that they raise people to higher levels. (p. 34)

Wilber (1998) wrote values of the culture must embrace democracy for students to feel sufficiently empowered to engage in the collaborative process. Furthermore,

Wilber maintained power must be shifted toward faculty-driven collaborative discussions. Brunner (1997) reinforced the concept that power parity is essential to a collaborative leadership style rather than power with autocratic overtones. Johnston and Kerper (1996) found this was not an easy task. In their study, they were unable to ignore their roles as professor and student. Furthermore, they found it was difficult to relinquish their power or overlook their university culture. In conclusion, Johnston and Kerper summarized that parity and power are more mutually dependent and liquid concepts than they had originally thought and that collaboration requires a more rigorous exertion at discourse than they anticipated.

Brunner (1997) stressed that leaders need to practice collaboration and not erroneously assume that delegation and collaboration are synonymous. Wagner (1998) cautioned that mutual trust and respect must permeate the organization to provide a safe venue for fundamental discourse and essential inquiry. Leaders must not fail to recognize capabilities of members, respect their contributions, and foster open communication within the organization (Brunner, 1997; Wagner, 1998; Senge, 1990). Along this same vein, DuFour (1997) stated that schools should require teachers to participate in study groups and serve on task forces. Moreover, DuFour argued that staff members should not only be invited to contribute but should also be expected to generate innovative ideas to improve the organization.

Brunner (1997) wrote that it is essential for leaders to allocate sufficient time for creative decision making. DuFour (1997) concurred by advocating appropriation of ample time for thinking, planning, curriculum and assessment concerns, as well as for interaction among colleagues. DuFour affirmed this posture in the following passage:

> Traditional school districts balk at the idea of providing teachers with time in the school day for such activities because it lessens "contact hours" with students. ...A school functioning as a learning organization would recognize that providing teachers with how they might improve the effectiveness of the school enhances the productivity of contact hours. (p. 86)

Senge (1990) contended that "To empower in an unaligned organization can be counterproductive" (p. 146). Senge suggested that to avoid this negative outcome, leaders must build a shared vision to guide participants in the collaborative process.

Models exist in literature to assist school leaders in developing a collaborative culture (Goldsmith-Conley, 1998; Lieberman, Falk, & Alexander, 1995; Wilbur, 1998). The Equity Culture Model presented by Wilbur (1998) restated the value of an equity culture and addressed other issues relevant to establishing an open culture. Wilbur presented a concrete guide for deliberation and decision making based on the following primary concepts:

1. Learners in an equity culture need to evaluate themselves and possess a self-concept that is both enabling and rational.
2. Learners need to be able to see themselves as an integral part of the community and have the skills to communicate and collaborate with others.
3. Learners need to process critically and conceptually.
4. Learners must act justly.

Organizations tend to thrive only if the individuals within the organization flourish (Krajewski, 1996). The leader, as the chief enculturation agent, has the responsibility for instituting and nurturing a collaborative culture. Krajewski. Touted, "If

leadership means anything, it means building others' strengths to achieve growth for all" (p. 3).

## Sam Houston State University's Model of Collaborative Culture

The faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership at Sam Houston State University currently enjoy a collaborative culture. The faculty members, regardless of age, rank, experience, and tenure, all support one another and co-exist in a cooperative, friendly, nurturing environment. Creating this culture, however, is not happenstance. Creating a truly collaborative culture requires effort – group efforts by all members of the culture. Furthermore, a collaborative culture requires continued effort for maintenance; merely working to create a culture is not sufficient. Once a collaborative culture is created, it must be continuously evaluated and nurtured in order to thrive. The model for developing and maintaining the successful collaborative culture at Sam Houston State University, as seen by its faculty members, is described below.

### Physical proximity.

One of the greatest contributors to the collaborative culture enjoyed by the Department of Educational Leadership at Sam Houston State University is the physical layout of the department. When the department of office space was remodeled several years ago, the Department of Educational Leadership created an office environment that fosters collaborative culture. A series of faculty offices surround a large central space in which the department secretaries, graduate assistants, and student workers operate. The offices of individual faculty members surround this space, each facing and opening into the central area. With a mere glance, the majority of the faculty can look across the room and see if other faculty are present. Access to one another is maximized, and

collaboration is encouraged through this layout. Rather than being viewed as a "watch dog" approach where a professor's attendance is monitored by others, this design is used as an "open door" facilitator, in which each faculty member can communicate with one another readily and easily at any time. Such physical proximity promotes constant communication and interaction among team members. According to Fred Lunenburg, full professor, "The structure of our physical space invites collaboration and open communication. Communication flows in all directions: upward, downward, and horizontal; informal communication is frequent, daily." In order to create and maintain a collaborative culture, this type of physical proximity among faculty members is a vital tool.

Deliberate Communication.

Effective communication does not happen by accident. All department faculty are expected to reserve one morning a week for faculty meeting and discussions. Typically the department meets on Wednesday mornings, and all faculty know to leave that time open each week to get together. Thus, meetings are not random and infrequent; rather, they are expected, scheduled, and a regular part of each faculty member's routine. These weekly meetings enable the team to work on both short range and long range projects. Agendas and minutes keep everyone informed and allow problems to be discussed when they arise. All faculty feel comfortable in bringing issues to the tale. Department members collaborate on every aspect of department operations: teaching, research/publication, program development, and service to the profession.

Communication is also enhanced through social development as well. Each month the department hosts a brown bag luncheon for the entire College of Education. A

selected speaker offers some brief insight into a pertinent topic (for example, an upcoming NCATE visit, changes occurring through the state legislature, a dean or university president search); all faculty are then invited to ask questions, make comments, or otherwise address the speaker or other brown bag participants. This luncheon provides an opportunity for communication in an easy-going, non-threatening social atmosphere. Likewise, the department also hosts a birthday celebration luncheon each month. This potluck luncheon is held one Wednesday a month, after the weekly department meeting, to honor anyone in the department who has a birthday or other reason to celebrate. All department members participate in this celebration, including secretaries, graduate assistants, and student workers. This helps encourage positive social interaction and camaraderie among all facets of the department, which is key to creating and maintaining a strong collaborative culture.

Shared Vision.

All members of a collaborative culture must share a single vision for their team. In the Department of Educational Leadership, all faculty members know what the departmental unit wants to do and what it wants to be. The development of goals and the frequent monitoring of progress towards these goals provide a common vision for all faculty. Thus, the atmosphere of the department is one of cooperation, not competition. Everyone wants the department to succeed, for all members are stakeholders in the department and its vision. One person's success is seen as a success for the department, meaning that all members share in the satisfaction of each individual's accomplishments. Awards, publications, and honors are not reasons to be jealous of another department

member; they are reasons to be happy that the department is producing successful faculty members. Again, a shared vision makes this type of attitude possible.

Selective Hiring

The department members strive diligently with the selection of faculty to hire persons who fit into our culture. Such care in hiring results in a faculty that share similar core values and beliefs. New faculty are hired through a consensus of existing department members, which also helps maintain the culture of the department. A position may go unfilled for some period of time rather than being filled with a person who does not share the vision of the department. Great care is given to ensure that new faculty will be team players, that they will contribute to the department's collaborative approach and be willing to share of themselves the way that such a culture requires. Additionally, all department members have public school experience (principal and/or superintendent) and publish extensively in the research and professional literature; therefore, department members are exemplary and self-managing professionals. Such a standard is considered when hiring new faculty members as well.

Also considered in hiring are the strengths and weaknesses of the prospective employee as well as those of current department members. Being part of a team effort in a collaborative culture means that every member contributes as he/she best can; one person's strengths are used to complement another person's weaknesses. The unit as a whole is effective because each member has unique contributions. According to full professor Jimmy Merchant, "New faculty are encouraged to become involved with all aspects of the department's program, regardless of what they teach, whether they teach on campus or off campus, or whether they teach in the master's of doctoral program."

The adage that a whole is greater than the sum of its parts rings true in a collaborative culture, and very selective hiring practices are critical to ensuring that this remains the case.

Effective Leadership and Empowerment

All major decisions are discussed by the entire faculty in educational leadership and participation is expected. The department chair encourages full inclusion of faculty in decision making, which extends beyond the classroom to broader issues of department policy and practice. Every member of the department has an equal voice in decision making, regardless of rank and tenure. This type of power equalization ensures that every person in the department feels a sense of ownership and belonging in the department. The chair of this department, Genevieve Brown, is a collaborative leader who works to ensure each faculty member is utilized to his/her greatest strengths. The chair encourages a climate where faculty members recognize each other as important; the recognition is both professional and personal. The ethic of care is extremely high among department members, and this care for one another adds a critical dimension towards achieving a collaborative culture. All department members model this type of cooperative and caring leadership; it is not merely a responsibility of the chair.

## Conclusions

The Department of Educational Leadership at Sam Houston State University exemplifies a collaborative culture at work in the university setting. This model creates a department that is happy and extremely productive. All department members are part of a team working towards a shared vision; they are not simply individuals attempting to publish their way to a full professorship. While the physical proximity of office space

greatly contributes to this culture, four other factors are key to the success of this department as well. Communication is a top priority; all department members are encouraged and expected to share, share, share, regardless of the topic or their rank. Shared vision is also critical. All faculty work towards a common goal, and thus the success of one contributes to the success of all. Another important part of achieving a collaborative culture is selective hiring. If collaboration is the goal, then all members must be willing to work towards that goal. It is clearly a "we," not an "I," approach, and everyone involved must share in that approach. Finally, strong leadership skills, which include empowerment of the stakeholders, must be exemplified by the department chair. All members have a shared and equal voice; rank and tenure refer to titles, not to a departmental pecking order. If a department can effectively achieve these goals, then creating and maintaining a collaborative culture is possible. And it is certainly worth the effort.

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